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ABSTRACT

Critical reading and thinking abilities can be encouraged among average and above-average secondary school students through the study of literature. One approach is to give students a study sheet on the elements of the short story. The students should be led through the elements listed and given an opportunity to express their opinions about the importance or significance of the title; the type of story; and the theme, mood, tone, point of view, and techniques used by the authors. Having modeled, by working together with the class, an analysis of the elements of one short story, students can work together in small groups to discuss a second story, using their notes as a guide for discussion. A third story can be used to introduce the technique of webbing, a graphic means of presenting related information. The individual assignment is to produce a webbing of a story of the student's choice. Another activity involves having the students create original short story awards, establishing the criteria for the award and choosing one of their short stories to be the recipient. Such activities can help students approach the tasks of analyzing what they are reading; defining important and supporting elements; and evaluating, interpreting, and supporting those evaluations. Appended are a study sheet, "Guide to the Elements of the Short Story" and several examples of the webbing technique. (HOD)

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EXTENDING THE READING ABILITIES OF THE AVERAGE AND ABOVE-AVERAGE STUDENT: CRITICAL READING/THINKING FOR GIFTED (AND NOT-SO-GIFTED) HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

a presentation for N. C. T. E
Spring Conference, Columbus, Ohio, 1984

Benny Hickerson

At the secondary level, reading is not only a means of providing pleasure and entertainment; it must be a tool. Being able to read for specific purposes, to acquire knowledge, to see relationships, to draw conclusions, to make connections as intended by the author and original perceptions on the part of the reader--this is what is required of the reader at the secondary level. The beginning reader will generally, with opportunity and with time, learn to read, and there is currently much attention focused on the best approaches to initial reading instruction. The remedial reader--those with specific reading difficulties--have agencies and specialists ready and interested and trained to deal with problems of diagnosis and remediation, and much attention is currently focused on this area of need also. The average or slightly above average reader appears to be the overlooked party in the area of reading education. The previously mentioned areas of reading, which are of extreme importance and interest, have had attention and concern given to them because of the necessity for attention in these areas. Reading specialists, especially those from elementary backgrounds, are most interested in prevention and

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correction of early reading problems.

From my perspective, having had a broad background of teaching including kindergarten through the 12th grade, I have developed awareness of the area of great need which appears to be receiving relatively little attention, and which seems increasingly to have serious consequences: that of the reader who has acquired reading ability in the primary grades, who has no noticeable reading difficulties in grades one through perhaps grade four or five, but who, by the upper grade levels, cannot effectively interpret information through reading, and who must rely on the teacher or some other "interpreter of text"--who cannot independently use reading as a tool for the purpose of gaining information. This reader lacks critical reading skills, and skills in critical reading. This may be reflected in a lack of pleasure in reading, a lack of ability to read content-area materials, or a lack of interest in the effort required to read and research material independently. This is the reader who needs to be taught <u>how</u> to use reading.

What is meant by the term "critical reading"? From the International Reading Association's Dictionary of Reading and Related Terms comes the following definition:

> CRITICAL READING: 1. the process of making judgments in reading: <u>evaluating relevancy and adequacy of what is read</u>. 2. an act of reading in which a questioning attitude, logical analysis, and inference are used to judge the worth of what is read according to an established standard. <u>Critical reading is the judgment of validity, or worth of what is read, based on sound criteria or standards developed through previous experiences</u>.

The term is of fairly recent origin, having been first used in 1965 by Betts. W. S. Gray, D. Russell, and others endorsed the critical function in reading because they believed that the thinking processes used in reacting to what was read formed a complete psychological unit, which was reading. In this way, critical reading came to be thought of as an extension of reading beyond the literal and interpretative levels. The principal focus has been on the evaluative aspect of reading. Critical reading may involve internal or external critical evaluation. Among the identified skills of critical reading involved in making judgments are those having to do with the author's intent or purpose, with the accuracy, logic, reliability, and authenticity of the writing, and with the literary forms, components, and devices identified through literary analysis.

This leads us to consider the definition of CRITICAL EVALUATION, again, from the I. R. A. Dictionary of Reading and Related Terms:

> CRITICAL EVALUATION: 1. the process of arriving at a judgment of the worth of a selection by examining the extent to which its content, form, and style achieve the author's desired purpose; internal evaluation. 2. the process of judging the worth of a selection by comparing it to other selections that are similar in purpose and of known quality; external evaluation. 3. the judgment resulting from internal evaluation and/or external evaluation.

Although it is a part of critical reading, it is not enough to be able to distinguish fact from fiction, to detect bias and propaganda. Critical reading should encourage the reader to develop his/her own

philosophy. In the process, the reader: accepts, rejects, puts together, raises questions, draws inferences, and comes to conclusions. Critical reading and critical thinking are counterparts. They must lead to conclusions upon which one can act. They must be goal-oriented. As Professor Faber says, in Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451, there are three essential componenets for reading and thinking. First, a book must have quality, or texture of information:

> 'This book has pores. It has features. This book can go under the microscope....The more pores, the more truthfully recorded details of life per square inch you can get on a sheet of paper....'

The second essential is leisure in which to think, to digest the information:

> 'You can shut them, say "Hold on a moment." You can play God to it.'

And third, it is essential that one be able to carry out actions based on what we learn from the interaction of the first two essential components. Thus, quality of literature, time to think about the ideas presented, and conclusions that lead to action are essentials of critical reading.

From the research of Bruner, Guilford, Bloom, Piaget, and others has come information about the cognitive process. It is generally believed that thinking processes develop from simple to complex. Students of average and above-average ability should be encouraged to extend their thinking processes, to use higher level though processes. Students

of above-average ability, those we consider gifted, are capable of great competence in higher level thought processes. Therefore, instructional strategies should meet the demands of the greater learning capacity and the anticipated social role of these students. Students should be encouraged to think through problems and to gain independence from the opinions of others, becoming able to rely on their own intellect.

Virgil S. Ward (cited in Nelson, 1983) states that thought processes such as judgment, inference, and reasoning should be the basis of education for gifted students. This process should be developed around the methods of acquisition of information that are basic to the discipline being studied: a program that stresses the importance of processes involved in learning, while applying these same processes to the content of a particular discipline. The core of most secondary English programs is the study of literature, which is ideal to serve as a basis for this kind of program. Nelson quotes the critic, Northrup Frye:

> ...literature is surrounded by the world of social actions and the world of individual thought and ideas. ...The initial effort of any critical apprehension of literature should take the form of rhetorical or structural analysis: should allow discovery of process inherent in the discipline of literature. (p. 15)

Such a program, rather than stressing the <u>product</u> (the work or the ideas) would stress the essence of the literature--the <u>process</u> by which it functions; not the opinions of others, but the means to understanding the nature of literature. One is inseparable from the other: elements

of a particular genre, whether drama, poetry, the novel, or the short story, cannot be separated from the human insight, the meaning of the work itself. Thus, critical reading can be taught within the study of literature as part of the process of understanding the structure of the discipline of literature.

Certain critical reading abilities are basic to all content areas. These include the abilities to:

1. distinguish fact from fiction
2. recognize the bias of the writer and the resulting effect on what is written
3. recognize the purpose of the writer and the intended effect
4. determine the main ideas and important concepts
5. determine and organize details, less important information that is used to support, illustrate, or explain
6. see cause and effect relationships, as well as other relationships within the material
7. transfer learning from the material being read to other applicable situations and areas
8. make inferences and draw conclusions based on the material read
9. respond personally to what has been read
10. determine the validity, worth, objectivity, and importance of what is read
11. use reference materials, the library, etc., to do independent research
12. be able to organize the information acquired through reading
13. be able to write or present orally an understanding of the material read

As illustration of how these critical reading and thinking abilities can be encouraged through the study of literature, I would like to discuss briefly some specific activities that I have used in my English/ Humanities course for gifted high school students. These activities

were used in the study of a Short Story unit, but these suggestions could be applied in many other grade levels and class situations, and to many other content areas as well. They will demonstrate the possibilities for encouraging critical reading and thinking with average or above-average students.

[see attached handout materials: GUIDE TO THE ELEMENTS OF THE SHORT STORY (study sheet) and ACTIVITIES FOR CRITICAL READING/THINKING]

Of the short stories included in my unit, and listed on the handout sheet, three are assigned to be read by all students. These were "A Rose for Emily" by Faulkner, "A Christmas Memory" by Truman Capote, and "Leader of the People" by Steinbeck. In addition, each student is to read at least one other story from the list for independent assignments.

Students are given a study sheet, GUIDE TO THE ELEMENTS OF THE SHORT STORY, which provides a lsit of the elements of the short story in outline form and makes suggestions to consider in analysis of these elements. Using this study sheet, students are to make notes about each of the stories they read. For the purpose of modeling short story analysis, I choose one of the three assigned stories to discuss in class. Students who have not previously been asked to use skills involved in critical reading and thinking will have difficulty in knowing exactly what it is that they are expected to do, and will want to find the answers directly stated somewhere in the material they are reading rather than arriving at their own conclusions based on material they have read. For these reasons, the teacher should present a model of analysis of

one of the short stories, with input from the class using the notes made whiel reading on their own.

First, lead the students through the elements listed on the outline study sheet, asking for their opinions about the importance or significance of the title, the type of sotry, the theme, mood, tone, point of view, techniques used by the author, etc. Encourage different opinions and ideas, but require support from the story for each opinion or idea. Lead students back to the story to the specific word, phrase, sentence, or paragraph that provides support for their analyses. Encourage students to discover that the writer chooses every word carefully to create a mood, establish tone, to develop a character or build suspense, or to present a theme. Having modeled, by working together with the class, an analysis of the elements of one short story, have the students work together in small groups to discuss a second story, using their notes as a guide for discussion. The teacher should move around the room from group to group, making sure that students are referring to the story to support their statements, but not attempting to impose his/her thinking upon the group discussion. It may be desirable to ask a spokesperson from each group to present a summary of the group's discussion before the class, perhaps as a panel discussion, to bring together the information from each group.

The third story is used to introduce the technique of WEBBING. Webbing is a graphic means of presenting related information. This technique enables the student to establish a central idea or theme, and to organize information that is related to the central idea in such a way that the relationship and relative importance of details as well as the links between concepts may be clearly seen. Information is

organized into a "pattern" of the student's own choosing, one which will fit the information as the student interprets it, and one which will aid in recall of that information. Again, to introduce the technique, the teacher will model the webbing method, with input from the class. This can be done with an overhead projector and colored pens, with colored chalk on the chalkboard, or in several other ways. To illustrate, I have included several webbings made by my students from Kurt Vonnegut's short story, "The Manned Missiles." [see attached copies of WEBBING]

The central idea, or theme of the story, is represented in the center with a design, word, picture, or logo. Branching off from this center design are the main elements of the short story, taken from the notes made by students as they read. Some of these branches may be linked, or some information may branch off from other main branches. Each major element should be done in a different color, to increase the visual connections in the webbing. The result should be a structural representation of the critical analysis of the story. From the three examples of webbings made by students of Vonnegut's story, we can see how each student's concept of the story is presented by his webbing. Each is different, yet each contains essentially the same material. The individual assignment is to produce a webbing of the story of the student's individual choice. The webbing should reflect the writer's purpose in that story. The teacher may suggest that these webbings take whatever form the student chooses, including 3-dimensional constructions. One example I received was a kite to represent Capote's story, "A Christmas Memeory," with the kite itself as the central idea and the tail of the kite providing a means for the actual branches of the webbing.

Another activity related to this unit which involves critical analysis is the SHORT STORY AWARD. To introduce this activity, the teacher initiates a discussion of awards, different kinds of awards, criteria, purposes, value of awards, and the results of receiving or not receiving awards. This can almost always be tied to some current award presentation, if the teacher wants to make it a timely discussion, as there are almost always some kinds of awards being presented. Both real and unusual awards should be included in the discussion. (My favorite award is the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award, for books worthy to share shelf space with Alice in Wonderland.) Following the discussion, have students create original awards, establishing the criteria for the award and choosing one of the short stories to be the recipient. Awards may take whatever form the student feels is appropriate and is capable of creating: certificate, medal, plaque, trophy, button, etc. The award, which must state the criteria as well as the recipient, should be presented in class.

While awards are generally positive, with high school students, particularly those who have been encouraged to think independently, some awards may be given for negative criteria. For example, one student created the OLDATE award; the name of the award is an acronym for the criteria: Old Lady Dies At The End. The award was presented to "A Rose for Emily" by Faulkner. One award, "The Tender Heart Award," was cut out of wood in the shape of a heart, mounted on a stand with a dowel, painted red with white lettering, and presented to Truman Capote's story, "A Christmas Memory." Another clever award took the form of a rock with a twig taped to its top, from which was suspended a tiny Smurf figure: "The Cliffhanger Award," to Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily."

These activities encourage students to expand their critical reading and thinking skills. Two important factors are involved. One is that students need to be shown how to approach the task of analyzing what they are reading: what they are to do; how to define important and supporting elements; how to evaluate, to interpret, and to support these eveluations; and how the writer's craft is used to present this information to the reader. This involves both modeling and guided practice. Secondly, students must feel comfortable in the classroom environment. They must have the security of knowing that their opinions and conclusions are sought and welcomed, while understanding that they must support these conclusions from the material they have read.

As a final statement, I would like you to consider with me this conclusion from "Reading, Thinking, and Writing: Results from the 1979-80 National Assessment of Reading and Literature," reported in Journal of Reading, May 1982:

> Reading and English teachers have no more important task than that of teaching students now to be thoughtful, critical readers....A society of individuals equipped to look beneath the surface and to think clearly amid the noise of modern life has no reason to fear the future, but a society in which the habits of disciplined reading, analysis, interpretation, and discourse are not sufficiently cultivated has much to fear.

This, obviously, is our task.

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National Assessment of Educational Progress. Reading, Thinking, and Writing: Results from the 1979-80 National Assessment of Reading and Literature. Denver. CO: Education Commission of the States, 1981. 91 pp. [CS 006 351]. Reported in Journal of Reading 25, (May, 1982), pp. 804-807.

Nelson, Warren L. "Literature as a Process: An Approach for the Gifted." Roeper Review (February, 1983), pp. 14-17.

SHORT STORIES USED IN UNIT:

Capote, Truman, "A Christmas Memory," Faulkner, William, "A Rose for Emily," & Steinbeck, John. "Leader of the People," available in Harris, Raymond (Ed.) Best Short Stories. Providence, RI: Jamestown Publishers, 1980.

Activites for Critical Reading/Thinking: Short Stories

(Unit developed by: Ms. Benny Hickerson, Trinity High School, Euless, Tx. 76040)

Almost any group of short stories may be used for these activities. My unit centers around the theme, "The Family of Man," and the following stories are used:

Faulkner, "A Rose for Emily;" Capote, "A Christmas Memory;" Steinbeck, "The Leader of the People;" Vonnegut, "The Manned Missiles;" Bradbury, "The Veldt;" Malamud, "The Prison;" Benet, "Too Early Spring;" Welty, "Why I Live at the P.O."

The first three stories are assigned to be read by all students; each student is to select at least one additional story from the list. A study sheet, GUIDE TO THE ELEMENTS OF THE SHORT STORY, provides a list of the elements of the short story in outline form for students to follow in making notes as they read.

ACTIVITIES:

1. Discuss the elements of the short story as presented on the study sheet, relating these elements to one of the stories assigned: require students to find supporting evidence from the story for their ideas of theme, mood, tone, type of story, characterization techniques, elements of plot, etc.

2. In small groups, students discuss and analyze a second assigned story, using notes made following the study sheet outline as a discussion guide. Teacher monitors group discussions to ensure participation by all and ensure that students are being required to give supporting evidence for their statements.

3. Introduce "Webbing" technique with the third assigned story. Explain the procedure and illustrate with student suggestions for elements to include, using overhead projector or chalkboard (colored chalk) to produce webbing.

> *Webbing is a graphic means of presenting related information, and may be used with almost any content. This technique enables the student to establish a central idea or theme, and to organize information that is related to the central idea in such a way that the relationships and relative importance of details, as well as links between concepts, may be clearly seen. Information is organized into a "pattern" of the student's own choosing, one which will fit the information as interpreted by the student, and which will aid in recall of that information.*
>
> *The central, or controlling, idea is represented in the center with a word, design, or picture. Branching off from this center design are the main elements of information (elements of short story, in this case). Some of these branches may be linked, or some information may branch off from other main branches. Each major element should be represented in a different color to increase the visual connections in the webbing.*
>
> *The result should be a structural representation of the critical analysis of the information.*

4. Each student is to produce a webbing of the story of his/her individual choice from among the stories not commonly assigned.

5. An additional activity involving critical analysis of short stories is the SHORT STORY AWARD. After discussion of awards, their purposes and value, various criteria and results of receiving awards, students are to create an original award, establishing the criteria for the award and choosing one of the stories from the unit to be the recipient. Awards may be in any form, but criteria for selection must be stated as part of the presentation of the award.

Ms. Benny Hickerson
Trinity High School, Euless, Tx.

GUIDE TO THE ELEMENTS OF THE SHORT STORY
Study Sheet

I. Author: What do you know about the author that may have some significance in relation to this story?
Title: What do you feel is the significance of the title? Support your statement with references to the story.

II. Type of story: Would you classify this story as primarily one of theme, character, action, setting, or mood? Explain and illustrate.

III. Setting: What is the time and place in which this story takes place? What is the importance of this setting to the story?

IV. Point of view: Is the story told from 1st person narrative point of view? 3rd person narrative? Is the point of view omniscient or limited? What is the effect in this story of the choice of point of view?

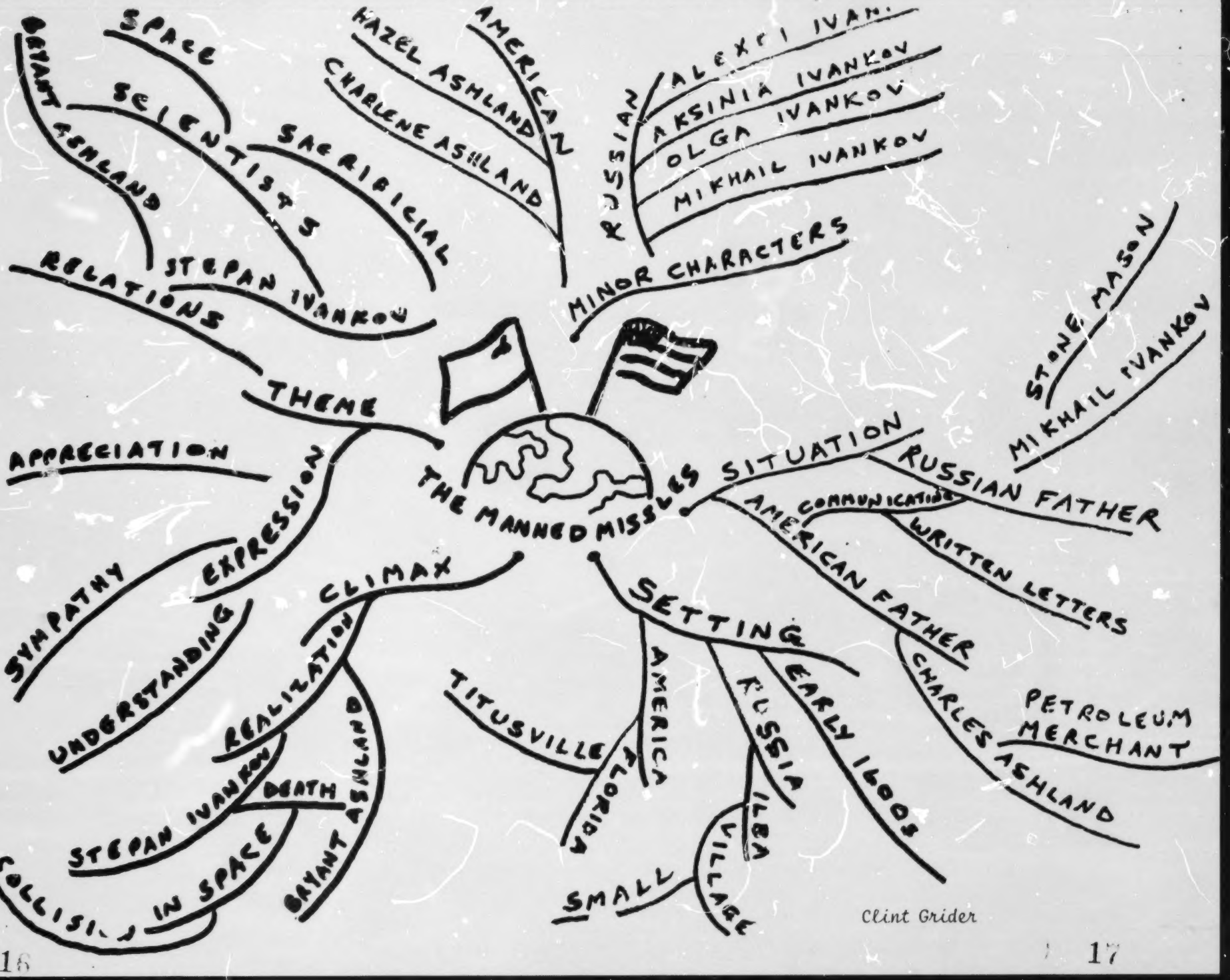
V. Characters: a short story usually has one, only one, major character, the protagonist, and perhaps one opposing character, the antagonist. Who is the protagonist? Is the antagonist in this story a person, or is it some larger force such as society, environment, etc.?
Are there other important characters, and what is their contribution to the story?

VI. Action, plot: What is the central conflict of the story: Protagonist vs. Antagonist?
A. Establishing the situation: How does the beginning of the story set the action going, introduce the characters, provide necessary background, establish setting, arouse interest?
B. Rising action: How is rising action (development of the plot) handled? Does the author use suspense to make you continue reading?
C. Climax: Briefly (in about two sentences) tell the climax of the story.
D. Resolution: Does the protagonist or the antagonist prevail? Is this ending satisfying? In what ways? How has the author prepared the reader for this ending?

VII. Mood: What is the overall mood, feeling, or atmosphere of the story? How does the author achieve this mood (description, character, details of setting, specific incidents, dialogue, etc.)? Illustrate from the story.
Tone: What is the author's attitude toward his story, characters, events, and outcome? (May or may not be the same as the mood). How did you determine the tone? Refer to specific passages to support your conclusion.

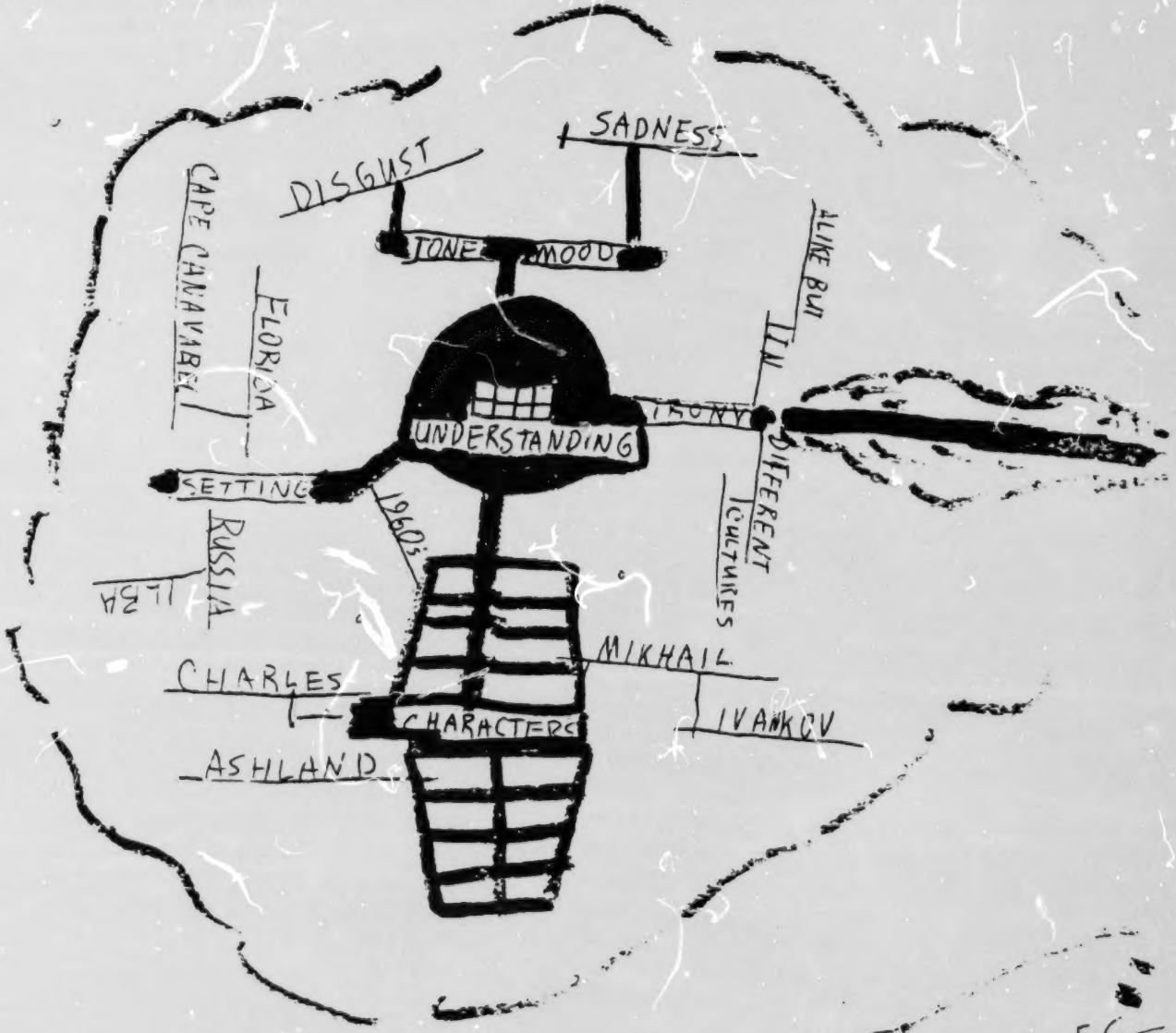
VIII. Techniques: Discuss any or all of the following elements of the writer's technique used in this story and illustrate with reference from the story:
A. Symbolism
B. Flashback
C. Foreshadowing
D. Irony, satire
E. Humor
F. Dialogue
G. Sensory images

IX. Theme: State the theme of the story in a simple sentence, beginning: "This story shows that...."



Clint Grider

EXAMPLE OF WEBBING TECHNIQUE
["The Manned Missiles," Vonnegut]



"THE MANNED MISSILES"

Bobby Olsen

EXAMPLE OF WEBBING TECHNIQUE
["The Manned Missiles," Vonnegut]

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